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Munitions and Mines: Peace Education for Laos

From the end of the Vietnam War to 1994, 10,000 Laotians fell casualty to the millions of pieces of UXO within their borders. The author recounts the role of Mennonite Central Committee and other NGOs in reversing this situation.

By Titus Peachey, Mennonite Central Committee

It was 8:00 one morning in March of 1998, when Phou Vieng, a villager in the northern Lao province of Xieng Khouang, was preparing his work for the day. Having recently built a simple house for his family, his first task for the morning was to dig several shallow holes in the earthen floor to anchor his bed. After measuring and marking the places where his bedposts would lodge, he prepared his digging tool and squatted beside the first mark. In one short stroke, his life was forever changed.

All Phou Vieng can remember is the sound of the explosion. Hundreds of shards of steel tore into his body from a cluster bomb buried just beneath the soil. One of the pieces of shrapnel punctured a nearby can of gasoline, and it burst into flames. Fortunately, neighbors gathered quickly and carried Phou Vieng to safety, but his house and all the family's belongings were burned.

The bomblet in Phou Vieng's house was dropped as part of a massive U.S. bombing campaign that flew more than 580,000 missions over Laos between 1964 and 1973.

This equals roughly one mission for every five inhabitants of the country and an average of one bombing mission every eight minutes around the clock during the entire nine years. Researchers estimate that approximately 90 million submunitions were dropped during the bombing campaign. With a dud rate of 10-30 percent, well over 9 million pieces of UXO were left behind. This ordnance, much of it cluster munitions, has now lain in the ground for over 25 years and becomes less stable and more dangerous with each passing year.

When the war ended, hundreds of thousands of Lao villagers who had fled the bombing returned to their homes. In most cases, everything had been destroyed. They had to rebuild their homes, repair the paddy dikes in their rice fields, and open up the soil with shovels and hoes. They carried on this intensive work in the midst of a staggering array of still-lethal UXO littering the soil. Unknown to them, their villages and surrounding fields had become one vast, unmarked mine field. With no one to help them, these villagers were trapped. In 1994, I asked one villager why he continued to grow vegetables in a location with bomblets, or "bombies" as they are often called. He responded, "I can't move my garden. There wouldn't be any point to it anyway. If I moved it to a new location, I'd just find more bombies there. So I might as well keep it where it is."

Thongsavanh, a teacher in Xieng Khouang province during the war years, remembers instructing his students to pick up the strange round pieces of ordnance that appeared in the forests and hillsides near his school. "I didn't know it was dangerous," he recalled. "I thought since the bombies hadn't blown up on impact they weren't dangerous anymore."

Typically, when villagers found ordnance in their fields and gardens, they simply removed it with their bare hands. They found within themselves a courage borne out of necessity. Farming was their livelihood and the only land available to them was filled with bombs. Indeed, with the passage of time, villagers became almost casual in their approach to the ever-present bomblets. An encounter I had

with Thong Dee, who was plowing his field in Lek Village, illustrates this attitude. When I asked Thong if any bomblets had been turned up during the plowing thus far, he matter-of-factly replied that over 20 had been plowed up the previous day. He had thrown or placed some of the bomblets into a hole at the edge of the plowed field. As I walked over to the hole and peered over the edge, Thong hurriedly pulled away the weeds and scrap metal he had placed on top to reveal the four or five bomblets underneath. Noticing that I was about to take a picture, he quickly moved each bomblet into clearer view, handling them like they were merely billiard balls.

Sadly, not everyone was as lucky as Thong Dee. Between the end of the war in 1975 and the beginning of clearance operations in 1994, more than 10,000 Lao villagers suffered injury or death from UXO. In many ways, the stories are remarkably similar to the stories of accidents from landmines. People are injured or killed during their everyday activities such as collecting firewood, herding cattle or hoeing in their fields and gardens.

Because of their curious shapes and colors, and because many of them can be found easily accessible on top of the soil, cluster munitions are

almost irresistible to children. In fact, over 25 percent of UXO-related casualties happen to children, none of whom were born when the bombs fell. On Nov. 22, 1993, four Tu Va Chao children were walking along a street on the edge of Phonsavanh, Xieng Khouang province's capital. They were taking the water buffalo to pasture when Kou Ya, four, and Sia Ya, six,

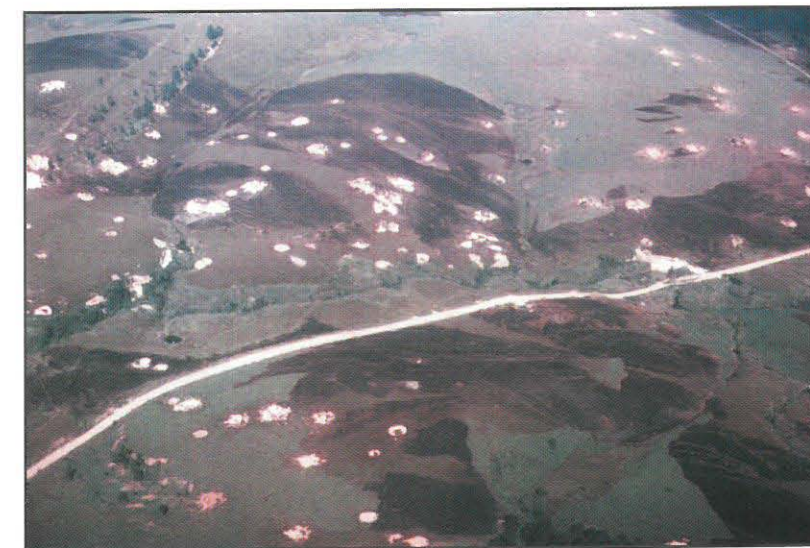
noticed a round object in the ditch. It looked like the ball boys and girls toss to each other during Hmong New Year festivities. It was actually a cluster bomb. Sia Ya threw it to her brother. He couldn't catch it and it landed behind him, exploding and killing him instantly. Sia Ya died after two agonizing days and nights in the provincial hospital.

The story of the Chao children illustrates yet another tragic aspect of cluster bomb explosions. Compared to landmines, cluster bombs have higher explosive power and deadly fragmentation effects. They are designed to kill. In Laos, 52 percent of all UXO accidents have resulted in death.

In the period immediately after the war, the Soviet Union assisted with the clearance of a large state farm in Xieng Khouang province. Aside from this effort, the only assistance came from two North American NGOs: the

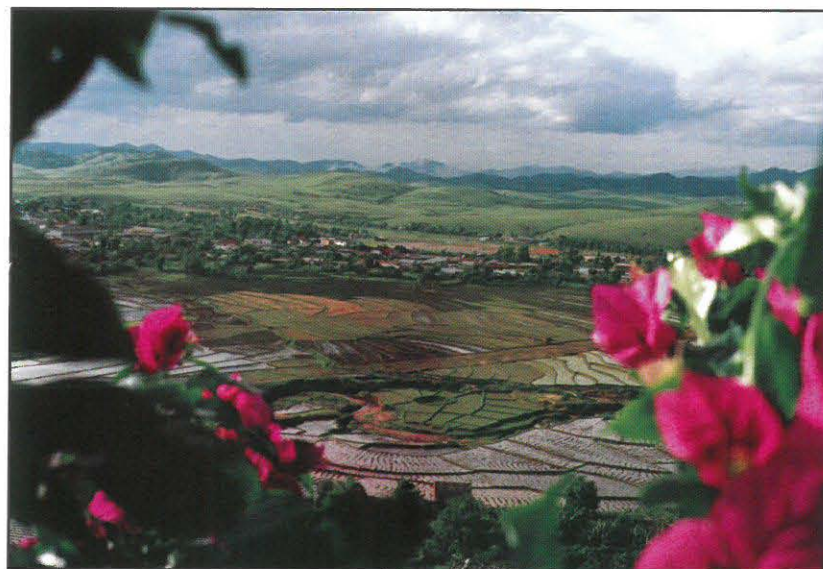


Mrs. Chao and surviving children. c/o MCC U.S.



Bomb craters in Xieng Khouang province. c/o MCC U.S.

Phonsavanh, the capital of Xieng Khouang province, is situated on a high rolling plateau. c/o MCC U.S.



Asia & the Pacific



■ Mines Advisory Group technician searching for UXO.
c/o MCC U.S.

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and the American Friends Service Committee. These groups imported good-quality shovels for agricultural use. Shovels were thought to be somewhat safer to use than the traditional Lao hoe, which was swung from high over the head to turn the soil. Shovels were gentler and perhaps less likely to detonate a hidden bomblet. There were other experiments in these early years, such as an MCC-supplied armored tractor with a chain flail device on the front. These experiments proved ineffective and were eventually abandoned.

However, in 1994 the MCC, the Mines Advisory Group (MAG) and the Lao government initiated a UXO clearance project. The project quickly drew the attention of U.N. agencies and other governments. As funding

became available, the project grew. From 1996-1998, over 122,000 pieces of UXO were cleared; approximately 50-75 percent of UXO cleared were cluster bombs.¹ By the year 2000, eight international partners, in cooperation with the Lao government and local partners, were clearing UXO in nine of the country's 18 provinces and educating local people to the dangers of UXO.

As MAG began working in Xieng Khouang province, Laos, the newly trained clearance teams encountered a curious problem. Each morning, when they arrived at the work site they discovered, resting on top of the soil, new cluster bombs that had not been there the day before. The work site was a large open area that was the future site of a teacher's training college. A conversation with the villagers across the road from the worksite cleared up the mystery.

It seems the villagers, who were aware that cluster bombs were being destroyed each day, decided to carry cluster bombs from their village to the clearance site each evening. In this way, the bomblets from their village could be destroyed, even though their village had not been chosen for clearance. This action by the villagers, while extremely risky, also made a clear statement about the presence of UXO in the vast affected areas of Laos. UXO is everywhere, and clearance teams can

only begin to create tiny islands of safety in a great sea of ordnance.

MAG and its counterparts in the Lao government responded quickly to this action by the villagers. Rather than putting all their resources into the sub-surface clearance of a piece of land, which would take months to clear, they split the team in two. One team remained to clear the site of the future school, while the other team traveled from village to village to destroy bomblets on the surface posing an immediate threat to life and safety.

Roving teams continue to destroy bomblets on the surface but do not make the ground safe for agricultural use. The benefit of a roving team is the immediate reduction in risk, especially to children who are often attracted to the toy-like appearance of bomblets. Over a period of time, however, the Lao roving teams discovered that they could be called back to the same area repeatedly. Bomblets that bury themselves on impact often work their way to the surface as time passes. Through the natural expansion and contraction of the soil and erosion, new bomblets appear where none could be seen before.

In May 2000, I accompanied a film crew to Laos to help produce a documentary that will be shown on public television. I watched as a bomb clearance team prepared to blow up

nine bomblets that had been found on a hillside used for grazing cattle. As the team worked, my colleagues and I spotted four more bomblets on the hillside. The metal shells of the bomblets had just begun to appear above the soil. This area had been cleared before and will certainly have to be cleared again.

April 2001 will mark the seventh anniversary of the beginning of systematic UXO clearance in Laos. Tremendous progress has been made since the first team of 20 clearance specialists was trained in 1994. Hopefully, all the destroyed ordnance has resulted in some reduced risk and some tragedies have been avoided. It is gratifying to see these developments.

Despite all this work, there has been little reduction in the rates of injury and death. Casualties still occur at the rate of about one accident every two days. As the Lao population grows and the pressure on the land increases, new areas will have to be opened up for agricultural production and settlement. Much of this land will present a serious UXO problem. Ordnance clearance work will have to continue in Laos for decades.

MCC's 25 years of history in Laos and ongoing struggle with the problem of UXO has led it into the arena of advocacy. As a people of faith committed to peace and non-violence, we could not visit with families who

had experienced painful losses from cluster munitions without asking the larger questions about why and how cluster munitions are used. As we researched the continued production and use of cluster munitions in numerous conflicts around the globe, we became convinced that serious problems exist related to targeting, the size of cluster bomb footprints and dud rates.



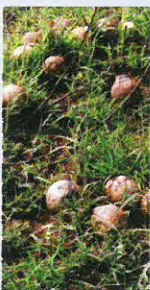
■ U.S. bomb on display in front of a home in Phonsavanh, Xieng Khouang.
c/o MCC U.S.

Over the past 35 years, in places like Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Sudan, Yugoslavia, Iraq, Kuwait, Kosovo, Chechnya, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Afghanistan, cluster munitions have had a persistent and tragic record of indiscriminate killing. During Operation Desert Storm, at least 25 U.S. military personnel were killed by U.S. submunitions, and other U.S. personnel were injured. Cluster munitions are an increasingly significant obstacle in various peacekeeping operations.

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WHAT ARE CLUSTER MUNITIONS?



Cluster munitions are small bomblets or submunitions which are delivered to their targets in large containers or shells. The container opens in mid-air over the target area, often dispersing the bomblets over an area the size of several football fields. A drop of several cannisters

can easily create kill zones of a square kilometer or greater in size.

The bomblets may be the size and shape of a lawn dart, or an elongated soda can, and are designed to explode on or shortly after impact. The AP bomblets have fragmenta-

tion features which can send hundreds of shards of steel at ballistic speeds over a wide area. Anti-armor bombs have shaped charges which can penetrate heavy armor. The cluster munitions are delivered in a bomb by aircraft, or launched by rocket or artillery projectile.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A LANDMINE AND A CLUSTER MUNITION?

The primary difference between cluster munitions and landmines is in their design.

Cluster munitions are designed to explode as a result of their impact, so that their effect is felt within a short time of their delivery.

Landmines are designed to explode as a result of contact with or proximity to a person. By design, their effects may be felt many months after their placement, depending on when a person initiates contact with the landmine.

Cluster munitions which fail to explode on impact, however, are very similar in effect to landmines.

Since dud rates for cluster munitions are often in the 10 percent-30 percent range, most cluster munition strikes create the actual effect of a mine field.